

You Did Good by metal_jenny_blog

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Everyone, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

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"Chief Hopper," Billy choked out, gesticulating towards Steve. "Harrington assaulted me and then stole my car—"

"You hit me first, asshole!" Steve snarled, pressing the bat harder against his neck.

"Enough, both of you!" Hopper roared. He snatched the bat from Steve's hand and pointed it towards the house. "Inside. Now." Steve looked like he wanted to protest for a moment, but instead, he took the gift that was offered. He wiped a hand under his nose and turned, jogging towards the house.

Hopper held out his hand to Billy and pulled him to his feet.

“What’s your name?”

“Billy. Billy Hargrove.”

“Okay Billy Hargrove, here’s what is going to happen. You’re going to get into your car and leave. Whatever is going on between you and Harrington, it’s over. Understood?”

Closure of the Gate to pre Snow Ball.

1. Closure

“You did good, kid. You did so good.”

Blood and sweat streaked El’s face. Her head felt cleaved in two, and her eyes felt like they were pressing into the back of her skull. Her hands gripped Hopper’s shoulders as he rocked back onto his heels, pulling her into his lap.

“Hold on,” he said, reaching a hand around the side of the elevator cage, punching the button to start their ascent. The mechanism whined and the cage shuddered loudly, and El started in his arms.

“It’s alright. Just getting us out of here.” He braced an arm against the side of the cage as it crept towards the light at the top.”

“Don’t feel good,” El whimpered. She pushed off Hopper’s lap and looked at him stricken. She crouched on the floor of the cage and heaved. Hopper rested a hand on the small of her back, rubbing in small circles.

“That’s okay. It’s okay.” El shook as she retched again. She became aware that she was looking through the grated floor of the cage and down into the abyss. Her eyes widened and she sat back on the other side of the cage, facing Hopper.

Hopper raised an eyebrow and his mouth twitched. “Yeah, never liked heights much myself. Feel better?” She nodded and a ghost of a smile flittered across her bloody features.

“Better.”

The circle of light above them grew larger, the motes floating in the air becoming more distinct. The cage rose above the lip of the laboratory floor and into the destroyed isolation chamber. Hopper stood and shouldered his gun. He leaned down to El and offered his hand.

“Can you walk?” The cage stopped as it aligned with roof of the chamber. El grasped his hand and gingerly stood up, lifting each leg

in turn and rolling her shoulders back. She nodded, and Hopper unchained the gate and motioned her out of the cage.

They crossed the floor of the chamber and made their way back to the internal stairwell. Hopper stopped El at the threshold. "We need to go and get Owens - he needs to go to the hospital and get that leg set. I don't want anyone seeing you, though. I'm going to call Jonathan and ask him to come and get you and take you back to Joyce's, and then I'm going to drop Owens at the hospital. Okay?" El nodded wearily, her drawn features suggesting the Hopper could have asked her to go to the moon and she would have agreed.

"Good." Hopper plucked the radio from his pocket and pressed the 'talk' button. "Jonathan, it's Hopper, do you copy?" The radio whined with light static and then Joyce's voice piped through.

"Hopper, is everything ok?"

"Joyce, I need someone to come pick up El at the lab. Owens is here, I need to take him to the hospital. I want El to go back to your place."

"We just left the cabin, we're on our way."

"Front entrance." Hopper put the radio back in his pocket, and he and El descended into the stairwell.

"Just let me drive."

"Yeah, Max got us here, she can get us back to Joyce's."

"Dude, your eye is way swollen. Can you even see us right now?"

"Shut up, all of you!" Steve shouted, yanking open the door to the midnight-blue Camaro and dropping into the seat. He glared at them, swiping at his left eye where a cut had begun bleeding again. "Well? Are you getting in or not?" The group hustled, piling into the backseat, while Dustin braved the front. Steve swung the car around, back to the long driveway at the edge of the field, making for Joyce's house.

The interior of the car was silent. Dustin brooded in the front seat, flicking a loose piece of vinyl on the passenger door. Steve didn't have the heart to tell him to stop. In the back, Lucas and Max clutched hands, and Mike stared out the window, watching the trees whip by outside and chewing on his lower lip.

Lucas nudged him gently, and Mike turned to look at him. Lucas tried to smile reassuringly, but it came out as more of a grimace. "I'm sure she's okay, Mike. You saw what happened out there. She closed that gate, I'm su—"

"We don't know, Lucas!" Mike said loudly, dropping his head back against the seat. "She might have closed it and gotten sucked back down, like last time. I thought I'd lost her once and Hopper hid her from me for a whole year. I just..." he trailed off, confronted by the enormity of what he was about to say. Beside them, Max pointedly ignored the conversation, staring at her hands. "Lucas, I have to think about her not being okay. I need to be prepared."

The concussive wave of Mike's words washed over the rest of the car. Dustin stopped fiddling with the door. Steve's hands gripped the wheel tighter. Lucas swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry. Max turned to face the window so they wouldn't see her tears. Mike slung his forearm over his eyes, squeezing them shut. For a moment, he wished the Upside Down would swallow him up, out of the car and before he knew whether El was alive or not.

The Camaro's engine whined as Steve nudged the accelerator, as if to try and outrun the pointed silence within the car. After a few minutes, he hit the long road outside Joyce's house, pulled the wheel left, bounced the car across the lawn and parked out the front. The driveway area was empty of other cars, and the house was quiet. The headlights illuminated the porch.

"Uh oh," Dustin said softly. In the back seat, Mike, Lucas and Max leaned forward to get a better look. Steve sighed and muttered, "Shit."

Billy was waiting for them on the porch.

2. Convergence

Hopper lowered Owens onto a park bench outside the lab with a grunt. Taking another look at his leg, he could see that it had stopped bleeding, but the gash was ragged and deep. Owen's face was grey and sweating. Next to him, El sat on the bench and folded her arms on the table, burying her face with a sigh. Hopper put his hands on her shoulders and bent close to her ear. "Not much longer, kid. We'll get you back to Joyce's and you can sleep." El visibly relaxed at his touch and his voice, so he stayed, giving her shoulders a gentle squeeze.

Over the muted ringing of the alarms coming from inside the lab, Hopper heard a car coming into the lot. Seconds later, Jonathan's car stopped outside the gate. He and Nancy got out, jogging over to Hopper.

"How's Will?" Hopper asked. El sat up when she heard his name.

"We got it out of him. He seems back to normal. Mom's in the car with him," Jonathan replied, catching a glimpse of El's crimson-streaked face. "Jesus, is she okay?"

"She needs to get home," Hopper said. "And he," he gestured at Owens, "needs a hospital."

Nancy eyed Owens warily, his leg looking like a bloodied side of beef. "Jonathan will take him. We're going back to Joyce's in the truck with you." She fixed a steady gaze on Hopper, and any objection evaporated from his lips. He nodded. Nancy moved towards El and helped her to her feet. Whispering to her softly, they walked towards the Blazer.

Jonathan nodded and went to his car to get Joyce and Will. Hopper sat next to Owens on the bench and took out a cigarette. He offered the pack to Owens. "Want one?"

Owens gave a small smile. "No thanks. You know, those things will kill you." He chuckled, and Hopper sniggered in amusement. He took a long drag and pocketed the lighter. "Do you need me to call

someone, Doc? Your wife, maybe?”

Owens shook his head. “My wife died, a couple of years back.” He sighed. “Cancer. I never took off the ring. My son is in Indianapolis, I’ll get the hospital to call him.”

Hopper nodded and looked away quickly. That word, *cancer*, was always a keen blade. He saw Jonathan coming back and dropped the half-smoked cigarette on the ground, crushing it under his shoe as he stood. “Okay Doc, you ready?” Without waiting, he and Jonathan lifted Owens and moved him as quickly as they dared to Jonathan’s car. They settled Owens in the front seat and buckled him in. Hopper slammed the door.

“See you soon, yeah?” he said to Jonathan. He slapped his arm and headed to his truck. Climbing into the driver’s seat, he looked into the back. Will and El were curled around Joyce, their heads resting on her shoulders, their eyes closed. She stroked both their heads and smiled at Hopper, her eyes filled with tears. He reached over and squeezed her knee, before turning back to face the wheel. He paused for a beat, holding the wheel and taking a few deep breaths. Nancy looked on from the passenger seat with concern.

“Chief?”

“I’m okay,” he murmured. “I’m okay.” He started the Blazer’s engine, and they drove away from the lab.

Steve got out of the Camaro slowly, the nail-studded baseball bat gripped firmly in this hand. The kids quickly followed suit, scrambling from the car and slamming doors.

Billy approached them, but Steve could tell he was still feeling the effects of whatever was in the syringe that Max had jammed into his neck. His eyes were glassy, with dilated pupils, and his coordination lacked finesse. As he drew closer, Steve could see his bloodied and broken nose, split lip, and a swollen eye socket. He imagined that he looked much the same.

“Get inside, shitheads,” Steve said, even though it was useless. The kids quickly flanked around him.

“Harrington, you son of a bitch, you’re going to be sorry you didn’t kill me!” Billy screamed, lurching towards them. He made to strike Steve; despite his own impairments, Steve managed to easily dodge Billy’s miscalculated throw. As the blow glanced wide, Steve stuck a foot out and managed to trip Billy, sprawling him on the patchy grass.

As Steve pressed the pronged bat to Billy’s neck, he could hear an approaching truck. The lights of Hopper’s Blazer washed over the lawn as he pulled up haphazardly next to the Camaro.

Hopper put the truck in park and surveyed the scene before him.

“Nancy, help Joyce get them inside.” He pushed open the door and slid out, slamming the door behind him.

“Hey!” he shouted, striding across the lawn to where Steve had Billy pinned under the bat. He slowed when he saw Steve’s face. “What the hell happened here?”

Behind him, Nancy and Joyce walked El and Will up to the house. Mike spotted them and immediately lost all interest in the confrontation between Billy and Steve. He ran to El’s side, the other kids on his heels. The sounds of Joyce and Nancy reassuring them faded as they all trooped towards the house.

Hopper nudged Billy with the toe of his boot. “I asked a question. What is going on?”

“Chief Hopper,” Billy choked out, gesticulating towards Steve. “Harrington assaulted me and then stole my car-“

“You hit me first, asshole!” Steve snarled, pressing the bat harder against his neck.

“Enough, both of you!” Hopper roared. He snatched the bat from Steve’s hand and pointed it towards the house. “Inside. Now.” Steve

looked like he wanted to protest for a moment, but instead, he took the gift that was offered. He wiped a hand under his nose and turned, jogging towards the house.

Hopper held out his hand to Billy and pulled him to his feet.

“What’s your name?”

“Billy. Billy Hargrove.”

“Okay Billy Hargrove, here’s what is going to happen. You’re going to get into your car and leave. Whatever is going on between you and Harrington, it’s over. Understood?”

“Chief, he still stole my car and-“

“Listen, I arrest both of you or I arrest neither of you. It’s up to you. You want to push this, I can haul you both down to the station and throw you in the lockup for the weekend. Or, you can leave now, and that’s the end of it.” He dropped the bat on the ground. “Way too much has happened tonight without me having to deal with this punk-ass shit. Go. Get out of here.” Without waiting to hear any further protests, he started towards the house.

The kids were huddled on the couch, talking excitedly, but trying to keep their voices down. Mike kept glancing down the hall, trying to get a glimpse of the bathroom. Nancy had taken El straight in there, despite Mike’s fussing, to get her cleaned up. Steve sat on the floor opposite them, leaning against the wall, a bag of frozen peas on the side of his head. Joyce had taken Will to her room, where he’d promptly fallen asleep. She stood at the doorway, watching him.

Hopper made for a chair at the dining table. He tapped a cigarette out and lit it, inhaling deeply. He heard Jonathan’s car pull into the yard. Joyce appeared from the hallway, arms filled with pillows.

“El should be out in a minute. Will is asleep. I’m guessing everyone else is staying here,” she said, as Jonathan walked in the front door. He nodded at Hopper, the gesture letting him know that Owens was okay. Joyce passed around the pillows. She walked past Hopper and

lightly squeezed his shoulder, before giving Jonathan a hug. Nancy and El emerged from the bathroom, El dressed in a pair of Will's pyjamas. She shuffled towards Hopper and crawled into his lap, settling her head on his shoulder.

Everyone was silent. Joyce move towards El and lightly touched her head.

"Want me to take her, Hop?"

Hopper inhaled the scent of soap and shampoo, and revelled in the warm, damp weight of El curled in his arms.

"In a minute," he replied.

3. Confrontation

Notes for the Chapter:

So, a few notes for this one: firstly, apologies for the extended delay - I knew where I wanted the characters to go but do you think they'd bloody get there? In the end, I wrote a couple of chapters but then decided to combine them into one.

Secondly: I don't know how exactly to put this without giving too much away, but suffice to say, there is some Jopper here, but it's not going to be exactly what people are envisioning. For those who require it, a warning, there's some fighting. For those who are unhappy with this, I write 'em how I see 'em, and am happy to discuss. Finally, to paraphrase Mick Jagger: you can't always get what you want, but you might get what you need. I think it'll make sense as you read it.

I absolutely love comments and will answer them all, please don't be shy, I've got a thick skin. Thank you all for the lovely kudos and I'm so thrilled people are enjoying this. It's so nice to be inspired to get back into fan fiction after so many years.

On with the show!

Sunlight filtered around the curtains in Will's room.

It played across the floor, where Mike had awkwardly curled on the carpet, a cushion from the couch wedged under his head. A blanket was haphazardly tangled around his legs. He'd snuck in after the others had fallen asleep in the living room. Hopper's snoring had provided ample cover for him to steal away.

El had observed him sleeping for the last hour. From her elevated

position on Will's bed, she'd watched as Mike twitched and frowned in slumber, and occasionally kicked out with his feet. She'd closed the gate the night before, but it looked like Mike was still fighting something in his dreams.

He gave a particularly vigorous jerk and his eyes shot open. He met El's gaze.

"Hrmph. El? Hey."

"Hi Mike."

They regarded one another for a moment. El gave a small smile.

"You make faces when you sleep."

"Oh yeah?" Mike yawned loudly. "I had to come in here for the quiet. I thought Hopper's snoring was going to make the house vibrate down the street."

El smiled a little wider. "I like Hopper's snoring." She rearranged herself on the bed, patting the space next to her. Mike scrambled off the floor and sat next to her. His face was serious.

"How are you feeling?"

El looked down at her hands. "I feel...good," she replied.

Mike's eyebrows lifted. "That wasn't the answer I expected."

El looked up from her hands. "I mean...I feel good that I'm here. With you. And with everyone else. I missed everyone so much."

Mike pushed a hand through his hair and frowned. "Hopper shouldn't have kept you away so long. I can't believe he did that."

El's eyes shone, and she leaned in closer to Mike. Her face was conspiratorial. "I got mad at him. I yelled, and I broke the windows in the cabin."

Mike chuckled. "You did? That's pretty cool. I bet he was pissed."

“Yes.” She fiddled with the edge of the blanket. “But we were both stupid. He just wanted me to be safe. He told me...he got mad because he was afraid. I think...I got mad because I was afraid too.” She picked at a loose thread. “I said he was like Papa, but he isn’t. He made me Eggos and he told me stories. He...is a good man.”

“You know,” Mike said, “I think this is the most I’ve ever heard you talk. Maybe he did do something right.” He shrugged. “I guess...I’ll try to give him a break.” He narrowed his eyes. “But if you ever feel like breaking the windows again, you call me and I’ll come and help. We all will.” He nudged her on the arm for emphasis.

On cue, there was a scuffling sound on the other side of the door. There were bump of a foot against wood, and whispers. A muffled knock, and Dustin’s voice.

“Can we come in please, we’re dying out here!”

Mike sighed theatrically. “Come in then,” he said, not unkindly. The door burst open and Dustin, Lucas and Will tumbled in. Will was pale and his eyes were ringed with dark circles, but he was upright and looking much better. The three of them swamped El, crushing her into a hug. Mike edged back from the tangled ball of limbs, laughing. “Jesus guys, take it easy!” They all jostled for position on the bed. Will caught El’s eye, and she grabbed his hand and squeezed it. She quickly rubbed the other hand across her eyes, catching the tears that had welled up.

On the door’s threshold, Max waited. Lucas followed El’s curious, slightly steely gaze and gestured her to come over.

“El, you know Max. You won’t believe what she did last night. She drove us out to the tunnels where all the demodogs were hiding. It was amazing. Then she helped us kill them.”

Mike watched El as she took in this information. Max tentatively held out her hand.

“It’s ok, El. No rush. Let’s get to know one another, okay?”

El took Max’s hand and shook it. She nodded gently. “No rush,” she

echoed.

Hatred clawed at Joyce's throat.

It started the morning after El had closed the gate. After a full night's sleep and time in the morning, curled around Will's warm, torpid form in her bed, there had been time to process things. Will was rid of the monster possessing him. El was alive, after performing a miracle. But Bob...Bob was gone. Torn open and devoured while she struggled in Hopper's arms, screaming. The next morning, as she'd watched him across the noisy breakfast table, she couldn't stop the loathing from bubbling in her chest, like hot magma. Later, as emotional farewells took place and the group split into multiple vehicles to go home, Hopper attempted to say a lengthier goodbye, but she engaged in the bare minimum, choosing instead to fuss over El.

She's tried to get back to normal over the next couple of weeks. Hopper, sensing that something was wrong, was suddenly everywhere. He would come into Melvald's and buy random items. Batteries and light globes; a pack of screwdrivers. Grease-proof paper and a basting brush. He bought her lunch; thick roast beef sandwiches, potato salad and bottles of Coca-Cola from the deli across the street. Joyce sat with him on the bench outside the store, out of politeness, and made her escape as soon as the sandwiches were done. She focused on safe topics like the weather and how Will was feeling.

He was suffocating her. She could taste the guilt in the food he brought her. It dulled his eyes when he looked at her. She knew logically that Bob's death wasn't his fault, but that didn't make a difference. Hopper's constant hovering just exacerbated her own irrational anger. If he didn't leave her alone soon, she was going to snap.

Hopper pulled into the Wheeler's driveway.

“Okay kid. I will be here at ten o’clock to pick you up. That’s ten-zero-zero. Right?”

“Ten o’clock,” El echoed. “Yes.”

“And don’t forget to thank Nancy for having you over.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“And don’t eat too much junk food, those kids-“

“Hopper, yes, I *know*.” El’s tone was exasperated, but her eyes were laughing. Hopper smiled at her and ruffled her hair.

“Alright kid. Go on then. See you at ten.” El jumped down from the truck and ran to the Wheeler’s front door. Hopper backed down the driveway onto the road, heading back to town.

He cruised along for a few minutes. Letting El go to the Wheeler’s had been easier than he thought. It had actually been Nancy’s idea. She’d dropped by the station on the way home from school, and said that her parents would be out of town for 3 days, and suggested that El come over one evening when the boys were there. They practically lived in the Wheeler’s basement most weekends anyway, and this was an opportunity for El to be with them without people asking any questions. Hopper agreed, but drew the line at El staying over. He was prepared for a fight when he presented the idea to El, but he didn’t need to be concerned. Her eyes shone and she was practically jumping out of her skin with excitement at the prospect of a few hours with Mike and her friends.

Hopper’s thoughts drifted to Joyce. He’d spent a significant amount of time trying to get something more than one word answers out of her, with little success. What banal conversation she made with him sounded like a constant effort for her to get the words out. Her eyes were clouded with sadness when she looked at him. She didn’t greet him with anything more than mild irritation when she saw him, accepting the lunch he brought her, but she wasn’t really there. She had thrown up an invisible barricade that prevented him from reaching her.

He'd intended to eat dinner at the diner with a newspaper until it was time to pick up El from the Wheeler's. He realised there was a few hours to see Joyce. He knew she blamed him for Bob, but he'd rather she just said it. He was happy for any display of emotion from her, instead of the robotic, disengaged version he was currently getting.

He made for the Byers' house.

Joyce recognised the sound of the Blazer in the driveway.

"For Christ's sake!" she exclaimed, angrily dumping the plate she was washing in the water-filled sink. She stripped the gloves off and threw them on the counter, and stormed to the front door, opening it as Hopper raised his fist to knock.

"Joyce, I--"

"Hopper, now isn't a good time," Joyce interrupted, deliberately fixing her eyes at a point over Hopper's shoulder, so as not to look in his eyes. "I've got a mountain of things to do--"

"Joyce, please, I need to talk to you." Placing his hands on her shoulders, he used his extra height and weight to push Joyce back into the house. He kicked the door shut with his heel. Joyce angrily threw her arms up, knocking his hands away.

"Don't touch me!"

They faced off against one another. Joyce's stance was combative, her feet slightly apart, her shoulders tense. She breathed heavily, her face contorted in a rictus of anger, so palpable that it stood between them, sylphlike.

Hopper spoke in a low voice, hesitantly. "You've got a free shot. Get angry at me. Yell, scream, do something, because whatever this is," he gestured helplessly. "This...two-dimensional politeness? I can't take it anymore."

Joyce's eyes fixated over his shoulder again. "Can you please just

leave me alone,” she whispered. Her spine was ramrod straight, belying her brittleness. Her neutral expression began to crack.

“No,” Hopper replied. “I can’t keep going through these motions, knowing you’re angry at me but refuse to show it. Enough. Take your shot.”

Joyce’s hand at her side twitched, but her stance didn’t change.

Hopper let out an angry sigh and reached out. Rattlesnake quick, he grabbed the flesh on her upper arm and pinched. Hard.

“Did you feel that?” he spat. “Do you feel *anything* anymore?”

Joyce’s face was ashen. Her words were laced with venom. “Stop it.”

“Show me!” Hopper shouted, taking a step forward, looming in her space. “Who are you, because you’re not the Joyce I know. Where is she?” Joyce’s face sagged. “Where is she-“

Joyce’s hand shot out, her palm cracking against Hopper’s cheek. A split-second later, she began raining blows. The strikes landed on his broad chest, his upper arms. Her clawed fingers raked his shirt. Her movements were wild and uncoordinated, pure white-hot anger. Her ears were ringing, and she realised it was from the sound of her own screams. Scalding tears streamed down her face.

Hopper planted his feet and accepted her rage. Relief washed over him as he felt the dam break between them. Joyce’s assault slowed, and she sagged against his chest. Hopper wrapped his arms around her and they sank to the floor. He pulled her into his lap and she sobbed on his shoulder.

He didn’t know how long it was before the shaking of her tiny body subsided. Her hands were splayed across his shoulder blades, and he felt her nose pressing into the crook of his neck. He tentatively lifted a hand and touched her head. His lower back had begun to ache. He would need to move her soon.

At the touch of his hand on her hair, she stiffened slightly, and lifted her head from his shoulder. Her eyelashes were wet and tangled, her skin mottled red from her anger and crying. He saw himself reflected

in the inky depths of her eyes.

Hopper cleared his throat. “Joyce, I-“

His words were cut off as she cupped his face and pressed her lips to his.

4. Coexistence

Notes for the Chapter:

Also available on <http://metal-jenny-blog.tumblr.com/>

Nancy opened the front door. El was on the front step. She was bundled against the cold in a new jacket and scarf. Her dark curls peeked out from a woollen hat, and her cheeks were rosy.

“Thank you for having me over, Nancy.” Her face and voice were serious, but her eyes sparkled with anticipation at seeing her friends.

Nancy smiled. “You’re welcome, El. The boys are downstairs. Max couldn’t make it, she has a cold.” She put her arm around El’s shoulders and guided her towards the basement stairs. “I ordered pizza for dinner; it’ll be here a bit later.” Nancy stopped at the stairs and pointed. “If you get tired of the boys, come upstairs for some girl time, alright?” El nodded, and descended the stairs. From below, Nancy heard the excited yells as the boys spotted her.

Nancy returned to the table where her open chemistry textbook and piles of notes were spread out. Despite the excitement of the last few weeks, she was determined to keep up with her advanced studies for college.

She slipped her headphones on and pressed ‘play’ on her Walkman. She got through a paragraph on noble gases before the doorbell rang again. Even though it was a little early for the pizza, she turned off the Walkman, picked up her purse, and went to the door. She swung it open to see Steve in front of her.

“Hey Nance.” The bruises on his face were a dappled yellow and brown, and the gash that split the top of his nose had scabbed over. He looked like a prize fighter. Nancy felt her stomach churn.

“Steve.” She gestured, holding the door open wider. “Come in.” Behind her, a burst of laughter and yelling floated up from downstairs. She rolled her eyes and shut the door. “The kids are here.

Only headphones will drown them out.”

They moved towards the table, Nancy hurriedly gathering her notes and textbook and piled them on a spare dining chair. She went to the fridge and took out two Cokes, setting one down in front of him. From downstairs, they heard Dustin swear loudly, and Steve stifled a laugh.

“He’s a riot, that kid,” he said. He narrowed his eyes at Nancy. “Don’t tell him I told you that.”

“I worry about the kind of vocabulary El is going to pick up, hanging around those boys,” Nancy replied. “One day soon, she’s going to drop an absolute clanger in front of the Chief and he won’t let her out again until she’s twenty-one.”

“El’s here too? That’s good.” Steve rotated the bottle in front of him on the table. “You know, Mike was really worried about her. Said he needed to be prepared that she wasn’t going to make it.” Nancy’s eyes widened. “It was a real downer on the way back from the tunnels.”

A strained silence settled between them. Nancy picked at the Coke bottle label with a fingernail. Steve rubbed his fingertip in the wet ring left on the table.

Nancy spoke first. “You left the Byers’ really early that morning. You didn’t stay for breakfast.”

“Hopper’s snoring drove me out,” Steve quipped. Nancy glared at him. “Sorry.” He sighed loudly and ran a hand through his thick hair. “I guess I felt like...urgh,” he grimaced, gripping the table with his hands. “Okay. Why I’m here is...I wanted to tell you that there are no hard feelings. About you and Jonathan.” He held up his hands as Nancy made noise to protest. “We all went through something together. And I...I guess I want us to still be friends on the other side of it. We haven’t spoken since everything happened. I guess...that’s all I came to say.” He pushed back in his chair, looking her in the eye. “Let’s not be strangers, okay? I’ve got no one else to talk to about all of this. Except maybe Hopper and he’s too damn cranky.” He smirked, and Nancy cracked a smile. She nodded her assent.

The doorbell rang, and Nancy picked up her purse. "That's the pizza." She got up from the table and went to the door, accepting the white boxes handed over by the delivery driver and stuffing the crumpled bills into his outstretched hand. She closed the door and sat the boxes on the breakfast bar.

"You want to stay for dinner?" she asked Steve. "I get to take a few of these slices before I send them downstairs." She took out a couple of plates and a stack of paper napkins from the cupboards opposite the bar.

Steve nodded. "Yeah," he said, getting up to help. "I'll stay."

The blood roared in Hopper's ears, and Joyce's soft lips pressed against his. Her fingers curled around the collar of his blue-checked flannel shirt, and she shifted her weight to balance forward on top of his thighs. She flicked her tongue against his lips and Hopper groaned, opening his mouth under hers. Her tongue slid against his and she moaned in answer.

Hopper fanned his large hands across her ribcage. He felt the color rise in his face and desire pool low in his belly. He was painfully erect. His jeans, his shirt, all his clothes were suddenly incredibly tight, and he felt feverish. Joyce ground herself into his groin and tunnelled her fingers into his hair.

Hopper wrapped his hands around Joyce's waist and scooted them both back against the closed front door. Joyce yelped at the sudden movement and giggled, then sighed in satisfaction as Hopper braced himself against the door and tipped Joyce further forward to his lips, as if to devour her. His hands grazed her hips and slipped under her shirt. Her skin felt like fire, even as his calloused hands caused its surface to rise with goose bumps.

She broke the kiss and her warm breath was on his face. Her eyes were hooded, her voice smoky with desire. "Touch me, Hopper," she breathed, and captured his mouth again. Hopper's hands reached higher under her shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra. His hands cupped her breasts and he rolled her nipples in his fingers. They hardened

like jewels under his touch.

The fog of arousal lifted slightly as he became aware of what was happening. He withdrew his hands and broke this kiss.

“Hopper, wha-?” Joyce said, her expression confused as Hopper pulled away slightly to look her in the eye.

“Joyce,” he said softly, his eyes searching her face. “Tell me what this means. What does this mean?”

Joyce hesitated for a heartbeat before pushing herself onto his again. “Hopper, come on. Don’t think.” She kissed him hard again.

Hopper felt himself drowning under her kiss. He summoned his last ounce of strength and pushed her off him again. “Joyce.”

She sighed, and pressed her forehead to his. “I just...I just want to forget. Please Hopper...help me forget.” She began peppering his bearded jawline with kisses.

Hopper felt his stomach twist into a knot. His hands fisted the tail of her shirt, his knuckles turning white. He felt a lump in his throat. “I really wish you hadn’t said that,” he whispered. He lifted her hips and swung his legs out from underneath her, sitting her on the floor beside him.

Joyce’s face paled and she made to speak. Hopper lifted his hand to quiet her.

“It’s okay. I’m not mad. God knows I’ve been there, trying to erase the memory of something with a warm body. But I can’t be your memory-erasing fuck, Joyce.”

She crossed her legs underneath herself and looked at the floor. She squeezed her hands together and muffled a sob. Hopper wondered if his words had been too harsh.

“Is it...me?” she asked softly. “You do this all the time, I don’t understand?”

Hopper drew his knees up towards his chest with a sigh. He chuckled, and Joyce's eyes narrowed. He reached out and rubbed her arm, tenderly. "Of course it's you Joyce. But not how you think. I don't want you this way. I don't want you using me to forget the memory of someone else. After all these years, that is not how this story goes." He leaned towards and put his thumb and forefinger on her chin, tipping her face towards him and lightly kissing her lips. "It... it's not time," he said, his voice warm and smooth like honey. He ran his thumb along her bottom lip, and Joyce let out a shaky breath. He dropped his hand and unfolded his frame to stand up. He offered his arm, and Joyce rose to her feet.

"I've got to go and get El from the Wheeler's. I'm sure she's put away several pounds of candy and will be bouncing off the walls all night. Maybe I should have let her stay over; she could have been Nancy's problem."

Joyce chuckled. "How is she doing?"

Hopper beamed. "She's good. We've had a couple of rocky days here and there, but we are managing. I think she'd like to see more of you though. I'm not sure that me as her main companion is a good thing."

"She had you as her only companion for a whole year, Hop. But I agree. Perhaps more girl time would be good for her. Especially with her being a teenage girl."

Hopper held up his hands and scowled. "No, no, do not remind me. I don't even want to think about it."

Joyce snorted a laugh. "Okay, well now I'm definitely making sure she has a female grown up in her life."

Hopper opened the front door. Outside, a biting wind had started, and curled around their bodies as they stood on the threshold of the door.

Hopper touched Joyce's elbow. "We're okay. Right?" he asked. She nodded, brushing an imaginary piece of fluff from his jacket.

"We're okay Hop."

He nodded and strode off the porch towards the Blazer. Joyce pushed the door closed softly. She rested her head against the cool wood, and let out a shaky breath.

Hopper opened the door of the truck and hauled himself in. He slammed it shut and gripped the steering wheel, hard. His forehead rested against the wheel.

“Shit,” he said. “Fucking stupid.” The adrenaline coursed through his body, and he felt slightly nauseous. He took several deep breaths. His vision was blurry. He saw Joyce’s shadow move past the window inside the house and pause, as if waiting. Then she moved out of view.

When his hands stopped shaking, he started the truck, and pulled out of the driveway.

5. Conclusion

Inside Hopper's office at the Hawkins Police Department, the telephone jangled on the desk.

He started awake with a snort, his large, booted foot clipping the cup filled with pens and pencils, causing it to spill onto the floor. He'd only closed his eyes for a moment. El had been awake most of the night, unable to sleep. After she'd shuffled aimlessly around the cabin; getting a glass of water, going to the bathroom, and, for a moment, wandering out onto the cabin's sagging porch, Hopper guided her back inside and put Grease on the VCR he'd 'requisitioned' from the police station. He'd rented the tape regularly for the last few weeks. When he's returned for the third time to book it out, old man Chapman had smirked. Hopper snarled in return: "Your mom loves it."

He snatched up the receiver. "Yes?"

"A Sam Owens for you, Hop," Flo's bored voice announced.

"Thanks." The line beeped through. "Hey Doc."

"Chief Hopper! How goes the policing?"

"Blissfully quiet, for a change. How's the leg?"

"Ahh, it's ok. The hospital patched me up and I've been at my son's for the last few weeks." Owens paused. "How is everyone doing? Will and...Eleven?"

Hopper sat a little straighter in his chair. "They're both healthy," he said cautiously.

"Relax, Chief." Hopper could hear the smile in Owens' voice. "I rang to tell you that I haven't forgotten about our conversation in the stairwell. I was hoping we could meet next week? I think I might have a plan to make things a lot better for Eleven."

Hopper sniffed. "Okay. Sure. When and where?"

“My son is driving me home to Hawkins in a few days, how about I call you then?”

“Sounds good. I’ll wait for your call,” Hopper replied.

“Take it easy, Chief.” The line clicked as Owens rang off.

Hopper dropped the receiver back into the cradle and leaned back into his chair. There was a knock at the door. Flo came bustling in, and sat a large package on the desk. “Just came for you.”

Hopper heaved out of his chair and moved the package towards him, checking the label. “Great, thanks.” Flo moved towards the door, and he called after her. “I’m leaving early, Flo! Have to get this home.” He shrugged into his jacket, checking the pocket for his keys, and put on his hat. He hoisted the package in his arms and headed out of his office.

As Hopper approached the thicket of trees that screened the cabin, he realised he wasn’t the only one there. He parked the Blazer next to Jonathan’s car and took the package from the front seat. Balancing it in his arms, he awkwardly navigated the trip wire and made his way to the front door. He tapped the two-one-three combination, and the locks slid open. He huffed through the front door, setting the package on the floor next to him.

El was sitting at the table, a pile of magazines in front of her. Jonathan was in the small kitchen, placing a foil-covered dish in the oven. He turned, and flipped the towel in his hand onto his shoulder.

“Chief Hopper, I hope you don’t mind. Mom made turkey casserole, she asked that I bring over one for you.”

“It’s fine Jonathan. Thanks.” He tousled El’s hair and she gave him a small smile, flipping another glossy page of the magazine.

Jonathan pointed to the oven. “That needs another twenty minutes and it’ll be ready.” He put the towel back on the bench and picked up his bag. “I’m going to meet Nancy.” He made for the door.

“Hey,” Hopper said, touching his shoulder. He offered his hand, and Jonathan shook it. “Tell your mom I said hi. And thanks for the dinner.” Jonathan nodded. He bent down close to El. “See you soon, okay?”

“Bye Jonathan,” she said softly. Hopper cleared his throat, and she looked up from the magazine. “Thank you for dinner.” Jonathan stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Hopper sat down opposite El. “What have you got there?”

“Pictures,” El said slowly, fiddling with the corner of the page. “From Nancy. Dresses.”

“What kinds of dresses?”

“For the Snow Ball.” Her eyes were wide and dark as she regarded him. She'd mentioned it a few times already. He knew Mike had asked her to go last year, before she'd had to go into hiding.

Hopper leaned back in the chair and sighed. He scratched the back of his neck with his hand, and then rubbed his fingers through the tangled beard on his chin. El knew he did this when he was thinking about the answer he was going to give. It was never a good sign.

“El, I don't know...”

“Please Hopper,” she whispered. He hands began to nervously scrunch the magazine page. “Please. I...want to go. For a little while. Please.”

Hopper stood up from the table. “Well, it's not that simple. It's not that far away. And,” he said, looking over her shoulder at the magazine, flipping a few pages. “I don't think any of these will work.” He walked over to the package, picked it up, and put it on the table. “I mean, I would have had to order something over a week ago, in order for it to make it on time.” He took his knife from his pocket and clicked open the blade, running it down the packing tape bisecting the middle of the box. “Plus, you'd need shoes, and makeup and hair stuff.” He flipped open the folded lid of the box and peered inside. He looked at her, and his eyes twinkled. “I suppose it's a good

thing that this came today.”

El’s eyes widened and she shot out of the chair. Peering into the box, she watched as Hopper lifted out the plastic-wrapped garment. Inside the translucent shroud was a periwinkle blue dress, made from a shiny material. It had a high scooped neck, lightly puffed sleeves, and cinched around the waist was a pink patent leather belt. The skirt was softly flared, with another thread of pink running diagonally across the skirt.

El sucked in a breath. It was too beautiful for words. Her hands began to shake.

“Do you like it?” Hopper asked.

Tears sprang in El’s eyes and she launched herself at Hopper. He snatched the dress out of the way before she crashed into his midsection, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“Pretty,” she said, squeezing him.

“Okay then.” Hopper gave a small sigh of relief. She let go of him and backed away to look at the dress again.

“There’s shoes, and other things in there too. I will take you to the Snow Ball and wait for you at my truck. You can see your friends and Mike for about an hour. Any longer and someone might realise that you’re out of place. When it’s time to go, there will be no complaining.” He frowned at her. “Got it?”

El sighed and flicked at the lid of the box. She nodded. “Got it.”

“And you’ll eat all your peas as well this week. If there’s a pea left on your plate, you’re not going.” He made his face as stern as possible, and El nodded seriously.

“All the peas. Yummy,” she replied, and Hopper snorted out a laugh. He carefully folded the dress back in the box, hefted it, and settled it down near the couch. He gestured to the bathroom. “Go wash up for dinner.”

As El left the room, he headed to the kitchen to begin dishing up the

casserole. He was absurdly proud of himself. He was still certain he'd be asking questions of Joyce in the next few days as he got El prepared for the dance, but so far, it was going well. All he needed was the last piece of the puzzle from Owens.

He placed the plates on the table. El came out of the bathroom and sat down. As they began to eat in companionable silence, a warm feeling spread through his body that had little to do with the casserole.

He wanted more nights like this. He wanted as many as he could get.

Notes for the Chapter:

That's a wrap, everyone! Thanks so much for the kind words and kudos. I'm going to take some time off to work on some original stuff.

See ya 'round... ;-)